

A Semantic Analysis of an Emerging BEI Construction in Chinese Mandarin

LI Wanyu

National University of Singapore

(e0320486@u.nus.edu)

Background Information

➤ **BEI+zisha** ‘suicide’

- (1) Zhangsan **BEI** **zisha** le
Zhangsan PASS suicide ASP
‘Zhangsan was suicided.’

CONTENTS

01. Syntactic Features

02. Semantic Analysis

03. Revision of the Argument

04. Conclusion

01

Syntactic Features

Syntactic Features

➤ Traditional BEI Construction

(2) Zhangsan BEI **Lisi** da le
Zhangsan PASS Lisi hit ASP
'Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.'

(3) Zhangsan BEI da le
Zhangsan PASS hit ASP
'Zhangsan was hit.'

Syntactic Features

➤ New BEI Construction

(4) Zhangsan BEI qushi le
Zhangsan PASS pass.away ASP
'Zhangsan was said to pass away.'

(5) *Zhangsan BEI **meiti** qushi le
Zhangsan PASS media pass.away ASP
'Zhangsan was said to pass away by the media.'

Syntactic Features

Construction	Examples
BEI+transitive verb	<i>luqu</i> 'enroll', <i>daibiao</i> 'represent'
BEI+intransitive verb	<i>juankuan</i> 'donate', <i>shizong</i> 'disappear', <i>zhangxin</i> 'pay rise', <i>xiangqin</i> 'blind date'
BEI+adjective	<i>kaixin</i> 'happy', <i>xingfu</i> 'happy', <i>manyi</i> 'satisfied', <i>pinkun</i> 'poor'
BEI+noun	<i>cishan</i> 'charity', <i>yibao</i> 'health insurance', <i>aizi</i> 'AIDS', <i>gaotie</i> 'high-speed train'

02

Semantic Analysis

Semantic Feature

➤ The Traditional BEI Construction

(6) Zhangsan BEI Lisi da le
Zhangsan PASS Lisi hit ASP
'Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.'

(7) Zhangsan BEI laoshi biao yang le
Zhangsan PASS teacher praise ASP
'Zhangsan was praised by the teacher.'

Semantic Feature

➤ Two Interpretations of New BEI Construction

(8) Zhangsan BEI qushi le
Zhangsan PASS pass.away ASP
'Zhangsan was said to pass away.'

(9) Zhangsan BEI xiangqin le
Zhangsan PASS blind.date ASP
'Zhangsan was forced to attend a blind date.'

Semantic Analysis

Construction	“be forced to do”	“be said to do”
BEI+intransitive verb	<i>juankuan</i> 'donate', <i>xiangqin</i> 'blind date', <i>jiehun</i> 'get married', <i>lihun</i> 'get divorced'	<i>shizong</i> 'disappear', <i>zhangxin</i> 'pay rise', <i>qushi</i> 'pass away', <i>zengzhang</i> 'rise'
BEI+adjective		<i>kaixin</i> 'happy', <i>xingfu</i> 'happy', <i>manyi</i> 'satisfied', <i>pinkun</i> 'poor'
BEI+noun	<i>cishan</i> 'charity', <i>yibao</i> 'health insurance', <i>gaotie</i> 'high-speed train'	<i>aizi</i> 'AIDS', <i>xiaokang</i> 'a well- off life', <i>wangyin</i> 'Internet addiction'

Semantic Analysis

➤ BEI+intransitive verb

Agentivity Test (*persuade*)

“be forced to do”

juankuan 'donate':

人们劝有钱人捐款给灾区。

xiangqin 'blind date':

妈妈劝小张去相亲。

jiehun 'get married':

他们的父母都劝他们早点结婚。

lihun 'get divorced':

朋友们都劝她离婚。

“be said to do”

zhangxin 'pay rise':

*妻子劝小张涨薪水。

shizong 'disappear':

*人们劝张三失踪。

qushi 'pass away':

*网友们都劝他去世。

zengzhang 'rise':

*企业家们劝我国的经济迅速增长。

Semantic Analysis

➤ **BEI+intransitive verb**

The interpretation is generated by the interaction between the **agentivity** of the predicate and the constructional meaning of the BEI structure.

The traditional BEI structure is associated with compulsion and affectedness properties and there is an implicit agent (Huang et al., 2009; Jin, 2010).

Semantic Analysis

➤ **Predicate with Agentivity**

The predicate with agentivity denotes an agent as the subject, which seems to contradict with the affectedness and compulsion meaning endowed by the BEI construction. But according to Zhang (2004), the BEI construction can endow an interpretation of affectedness to an argument which lacks this feature outside of this context.

→ The surface agent carries out the action but is also regarded as being affected and compelled by the implicit agent to some extent. In other words, the agent is forced to do the thing.

Semantic Analysis

➤ Predicate with Affectedness

There is redundancy because both BEI and the predicate endow the surface subject with affectedness property. So the thematic role of the surface subject can only be a patient. But it is hard to decide whether the subject is affected by this action or not.

The predicate does not specify any agentive argument but there is an implicit agent implied by the BEI construction.

→ It is unclear whether the event occurred on the patientive subject because it is actually a rumor spreaded by the implicit agent.

Semantic Analysis

➤ **BEI+intransitive verb**

To sum up, in the new BEI construction, **agentive predicates** can be compatible with this BEI structure but the subject is associated with affectedness and compulsion, thus being interpreted as “**be forced to do**”.

A predicate with a patient/affectee argument encounters redundancy in terms of **affectedness**, and an agent is implied by the construction, thus generating the “**be said to do**” interpretation.

Semantic Analysis

➤ BEI+adjective

The only argument that an adjective assigns is lack of agentivity, resulting in “be said to do” interpretation.

Construction	“be forced to do”	“be said to do”
BEI+adjective		<i>kaixin</i> 'happy', <i>xingfu</i> 'happy', <i>manyi</i> 'satisfied', <i>pinkun</i> 'poor'

Semantic Analysis

➤ BEI+noun

It is noticed that the noun follows BEI is not the agent. It actually functions as the predicate of the clause, which is thus verbalized (Peng & Gan, 2010).

BEI+noun

(*zuo*) *cishan* '(make contributions to) charity'

(*mai*) *yibao* '(buy) health insurance'

(*zuo*) *gaotie* '(take) high-speed train'

(*de*) *aizi* '(have) AIDS'

(*dadao*) *xiaokang* '(achieve) a well-off life'

(*you*) *wangyin* '(have) Internet addiction'

Semantic Analysis

➤ BEI+noun

Agentivity Test (*persuade*)

cishan 'charity':

很多人都劝小张多（做）慈善。

yibao 'health insurance':

政府劝人们（买）医保。

gaotie 'high-speed train':

小张劝同事（坐）高铁回家。

aizi 'AIDS':

*医生劝张女士（得）艾滋。

xiaokang 'a well-off life':

*很多人都劝农村居民（达到）小康。

wangyin 'Internet addiction':

*网吧老板劝这群孩子（有）网瘾。

“be forced to do”

“be said to do”

Semantic Analysis

➤ Claim

In a sentence with the new BEI construction, when the predicate is of **agentivity**, the clause is interpreted as “**be forced to do**”, while **affectedness** of the predicate leads to the “**be said to do**” understanding.

03

Revision of the Argument

Revision of the Argument

➤ BEI+*zisha* ‘suicide’

(10) weishenme zong you shengyin quan ta zisha?
why always be voice persuade her suicide
'Why is there always a voice that persuades her to commit suicide?'

(11) Zhangsan BEI zisha le
Zhangsan PASS suicide ASP

‘Zhangsan was said to commit suicide.’

- Although the predicate *zisha* ‘suicide’ is of high agentivity, it has strong **volitionality**, which goes against the compulsory meaning endowed by the BEI structure.

Revision of the Argument

➤ Rule for Interpretation

Rule	Property of the Predicate	Interpretation
1	[+strong volitionality]	“be said to do”
2	[+affectedness]	“be said to do”
3	[+agentivity]	“be forced to do”

Rule 1 must be applied first.

04

Conclusion

Conclusion

The new BEI construction is the inheritance and innovation of the traditional BEI construction both syntactically and semantically.

In terms of syntactic structure, it is based on one type of the traditional BEI construction, i.e., BEI+predicate and bands the two elements together closely.

Semantically, it inherits the negative semantic feature of the traditional BEI construction and triggers two distinctive interpretations “be said to do” and “be forced to do” because of the interaction between the constructional meaning of the BEI structure and the lexical meaning of the predicate.

Conclusion

However, as a new construction, it is still in change:

➤ **Semantic meaning**

(12) Zhongguo nanlan BEI chuxian! Qiji!
China men's basketball PASS qualify! Miracle!
'Chinese men's basketball was qualified! What a miracle!'

Conclusion

➤ Interpretation of BEI+*lihun* ‘get divorced’

(13) ta de pengyou quan ta lihun?
she GEN friend persuade her get.divorced
'Her friend persuaded her to get divorced.'

(14) Zhangsan BEI lihun le
Zhangsan PASS get.divorced ASP
'Zhangsan was forced to get divorced.'
'Zhangsan was said to get divorced.'

- Whether this new construction can be fixed as a new usage of BEI construction still requires further observation.

Thank you!

LI Wanyu
National University of Singapore
(e0320486@u.nus.edu)